DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 133 119 RC 009 597

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TITLE The Formation and Development of an Ethnic Group: The "Cajuns" of Alabama.
PUB DATE 19 Nov 74
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (73rd, Mexico City, November 19-24, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Background; *Cultural Isolation; Culturally Disadvantaged; Culture Contact; *Ethnic Origins; Family (Sociological Unit); Labeling (of Persons); Minority Groups; *Rural Population; *Social History
IDENTIFIERS *Alabama; *Cajuns

ABSTRACT

There are 4,500 "Cajuns" occupying a rural area in southern Alabama which was once practically isolated from the surrounding society. Local residents regard these "Cajuns" as neither White nor Black. It is generally recognized that they are a recent mixture of several distinct peoples. There is no evidence that these people have a coherent set of customs, legends, traditions, festivals, special holidays, or other identifying symbols to unite them. The people do not have a unique religion of their own nor do all belong to the same religious denomination. The community represents a unique ethnic island in that the customary factors which unite a people are not present. However, they do have a sense of group consciousness which is derived from factors other than those traditionall regarded as important. Probably the strongest single factor providing a sense of in-group consciousness, identification, and cohesiveness is the extensive kinship linkages which exist among this relatively large population. This paper discusses the historical events that led to the formation and subsequent development of the "Cajuns" in Alabama. Topics covered are their kinship linkages, their school situation, and their use of the term "Cajun". (NQ)

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# THE FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF AN ETHNIC GROUP: THE "CAJUNS" OF ALABAMA

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Paper presented at the 73rd Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Mexico City, 19-24 Nov 1974

In the southern part of Alabama, about 35 miles north of Mobile, there resides a people that has only recently acquired a collective identity. They inhabit a rural area nine miles wide by eighteen miles long which was once practically isolated from the environing society. Cut off from the opportunity structure of the larger society, the residents of this community have eked out a bare existence in the stark, piney woods of the Gulf Coast. "They are probably the most deprived group in America," is the way one government agency employee summed up the situation. A county official agreed with this description: They have absolutely no cash reserves." As a third group in a Black-White world, they are the objects of discrimination by both majority and minority. Indeed, they are so poor that they do not even possess a name that pleases them. They bear the name Cajun.

According to one tradition, the word "Cajun" was first used about 1885 by State Senator L. W. McRae to refer to this part of his constituency because he believed they resembled the Cajuns of Louisiana. However, there is no evidence of any kind to support a belief that there is any historical connection between these people and the Louisiana Cajuns. In the past, the Alabama people have generally been offended by being referred to as Cajuns and have refused to be identified by the term. The basis of their offense seems not to have been simply a negative

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January 1977

response to the ethnic connotations of the term, but, rather to the fact that they felt the term was used in a derogatory manner. Within the past several months there seems to be a slight change in attitude among some of the members of the community regarding the use of the term Cajun. This change in attitude is particularly evident among the young people and seems to parallel a development among Blacks in which efforts are being made to change the Black self-image. These people have begun to develop such slogans as "Cajuns Are Beautiful!" and "Cajun Power." Ironically this development also parallels a move toward heightened ethnic consciousness among the Louisiana Cajuns (Morin-Chandler, 1973: 1). This recent development notwithstanding, the term "Cajun" is both historically inaccurate and, in general, unappreciated by the people themselves.

There is another connotation of the use of the term Cajun by the outsider which deserves mention. It is undoubtedly true that many outsiders do not intend to use the term "Cajun" in a derogatory sense, but simply do not have another term to use. Whites and Blacks in the area rarely if ever use the term in the presence of the people themselves. Local Whites use the word "Cajun" much as they use the word "Nigger." They may use both expressions frequently in their own group, but local etiquette tends to prohibit the usage of either term when the referents of the terms are physically present.

It is also doubtful that the residents of the isolate have a consistent term to use in reference to themselves. This fact may be the most important key to understanding the nature of this isolate. It represents a major dilemma that a study of the group presents for the researcher. If the group had a name that it accepted, or, if they had a coherent tradition and customs which linked the

members to one another, the job of answering the question, "Who are the Cajuns?" might be a simpler one. The fact that the group cannot be said to be bound by a pervasive unifying factor which results in a strong sense of group identification presents the researcher with an anomaly. Here is a community with an estimated 4500 inhabitants. They are regarded by local residents as neither White nor Black. It is generally recognized by the people themselves as well as by Blacks and Whites that they are a recent mixture of several distinct peoples. It is acknowledged that they are "different" from the Black and White communities surrounding them. However, there is no evidence that the people have a coherent set of customs, legends, traditions, festivals, special holidays, or other identifying symbols to unite them. The people do not have a unique religion of their own nor do all belong to the same religious denomination. There is no one tribal chief or community leader around which the group as a group can be said to be united. The community represents a unique ethnic island in that the customary factors that can be identified as uniting a people are not present. On the other hand, it would be a major distortion to intimate that these people do not have a sense of group consciousness. They do, but it is a consciousness derived from factors other than those traditionally regarded as important.

Perhaps the best way to place in perspective the position this group has in its social mileau is to reconstruct the historical events that led to its formation and subsequent development. In 1836, during the administration of President Andrew Jackson, the Indian peoples occupying the geographical area we are now concerned with were forced to migrate to western territories. About two thousand persons remained behind after the first exodus. A second exodus took place in 1838, at which time General Winfield Scott was able to report: "All the

Alabama Indians with few, if any, exceptions" are in the process of removal (Tipton, 1921). Present-day leaders of the group strongly believe that members of the Choctaw tribe were given permission to desert the westward migration and return to Alabama on the promise that when they returned they would not form a tribe. The likelihood that Choctaws and possibly other groups as well did return to the area and intermarry with the Reed offspring and other locals of similar nature is a plausible theory about the origin of the present isolate.

No account of these people would be complete without going into further detail about the Reed family. The Reed family has provided this people with a historical figure, Rose Reed, whom they have elevated to a legendary status in their myth of origin. Such a development frequently occurs among recently formed peoples or among older groups that are struggling to maintain their collective identity. For example, the Melungeons of Tennessee trace their origins to the Phonecians. The Lumbee Indians of North Carolina believe they are descended from White settlers of Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony who were captured by Indians. And, in the case of the Alabama Cajuns, they take considerable pride in recounting the fact that Rose Reed lived to be 110 years old and that numerous descendants issued from her union with Daniel Reed. Although it is not prominently recounted, there definitely exists a legend among people in the area that Rose was a "beautiful princess" who was brought by Daniel Reed from one of the islands of the West Indies. The known facts do not lend strong support to this belief about her origin. The historical record does not clearly indicate what her husband's ethnic heritage might have been. According to oral tradition, he came from Santo Domingo during the early 19th century. He may have been

part-French or part-Spanish. Early Alabama territorial and state documents identify him as a "free person of color" or as a "free Negro" (Toulmin, 1823: 211). The documentary record of Rose has her first appearing as a slave in Alabama, although she once listed her birthplace as Mississippi. The records show that Daniel purchased her from a white master and, that in February, 1818, Rose was emancipated by an act of the territorial legislature.

Even though the proportion of Indian admixture to this isolate cannot be accurately determined, the fate of Daniel Reed's descendants is a matter of public record. In fact, the Reed family tree as well as the geneology of other major families in the isolate have been carefully investigated by a number of persons.[1] Such an interest in geneology probably stemmed from the growing Jim Crowism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries which saw the lines of segregation gradually harden. Not only did the separation of the races become a more vital issue, but the laws defining racial composition based on ancestry broadened so as to exclude from white society anyone with "Negro blood" no matter how much diluted. The light skin color of some persons known as Cajuns would permit them, on the basis of their physical characteristics, to cross the color line. The identification of families presumed to be Cajun was therefore necessary to avoid social integration.

For the first generation at least, the task of following Reed's progeny is not difficult. All of his children are identified in the county records, although not all shared his estate. Four of the five daughters married--all of them to white men --and the three sons married mulatto sisters. These seven unions produced an impressive total of 65 children who lived beyond infancy. Their ancestry may be uncertain, but not their fecundity. On no occasion did Reed's descendants

refer to themselves as Negro; in the census reports they are always listed as mulatto with the exception of one family which was listed as white. (Descendants of this particular family now seem to have gained almost complete acceptance in the white community. Older persons of the white community, as well as in the isolate, are generally aware of the early history of the family, and will speak of it in a guarded manner. But their knowledge is not openly acted upon. It apparently is too explosive.)

Not until 1950 were the Census enumerators permitted to use local designations for minorities. One of the Census enumerators who participated in the 1950 Census reported to the authors that he met privately with one of the leading residents of the community and asked him what term should be used on the forms. The resident replied that "Indian" was preferred. The Census enumerator --a white man--indicated that he used the term "Indian" exclusively in his assigned area on the basis of that conversation. One investigator, after studying the 1950 Census, not only found the distinctive listings (734 Indian and 361 Cajun), but also determined on the basis of surnames and apparent family relationships "that there were about 288 persons listed as white and 449 as Negro who were a part of the Cajan (sic.) group.[2] These figures relate only to Washington County, but by this time many persons identified with the group lived in adjacent Mobile County. No enumerator in Mobile County used the term Cajun or Cajan in the 1950 Census. It has been estimated, on the basis of local surnames and family sequences, that 86 persons were classified as Indians, 737 as white, and 137 as Negro (Beale, 1964).

Such proliferation supports the obvious fact that families other than the Reed branch, arising from similar circumstances, contributed to the membership of the isolate. The three most common surnames are Weaver, Reed, and Byrd--in that order. Other names associated with the isolate are Taylor, Rivers, Young, Daugherty, Bryant, Cole, Snow, and Patrick. Even though intermarriage between them has become rather common, each derived from separate progenitors. Lemuel Byrd appears in the Mobile County Census report of 1840 as a free person of color, having reportedly come from North Carolina with Andrew Jackson during the Indian campaigns. His wife Anna reputedly was named Weaver and was likely related to the two Weavers, claiming to be from Georgia, who appear in the 1830 Mobile County Census as free persons of color (See Price, 1950: 99, 100). Some of the other famiiy names of the isolate have been identified as deriving from whites who married into the group, and one entry, Chestang, possibly indicates Creole origins. This cannot be definitely established, however, leaving the exact composition of this isolate to await more scientific means of genetic determination. Efforts by several researchers to utilize procedures such as blood typing, obtaining cephalic indices, etc., are known to have been attempted, but unsuccessfully, because of opposition by persons in the community.

This community has been so isolated from the larger society that few residents of the state of Alabama know it exists. When the authors mention the group, they typically receive a response like, "I didn't know there were any Cajuns in Alabama. I thought they all lived in Louisiana." Then we usually explain that the Cajuns of Louisiana are persons of French descent whom the

British deported from their homes in Acadia ("Acadian" became "A-ca-djun," and eventually "Cajun"). Their obscurity as well as the mystery that surrounds the Alabama community is documented in the following anecdote:

The topic of discussion in a sociology classroom at Mobile College during the Spring of 1972 centered around the combined efforts made by the Federal government, members of the Carson-Newman College faculty, and local community leaders, to help the Melungeon people of Sneedville, Tennessee develop a program of community improvement. References to the Melungeons as being a people of mixed ethnic background who had not been assimilated into the dominant surrounding culture ultimately led to a question about a group of people closer to the vicinity of Mobile College. One student wanted to know if any programs had been developed to help the "Cajuns" that lived near McIntosh, Alabama about 35 miles northwest of Mobile. The answer given by the professor was that he felt fairly confident that no programs had been developed but that the student should be cautious in his use of the word "Cajun" because he understood that the people of that area were sensitive to the use of that name.

The student wanted to know if they were not "Cajuns," then who were they. Several class members offered opinions as to the character and make up of the group. One of the Black students said that the people were of lower social status than the Blacks, and sometimes worked as servants in the homes of Blacks. This opinion led to a vehement denial by another student that the previous statement was untrue and that the truth was that the people in question would have nothing to do with Blacks. Another student said that he did not know what their ethnic make-up was but that they had a reputation for violence and were

known to carry a "swear to god" strapped to their legs. The definition was then given that a "swear to god" was a big knife and that particularly the male high school student would "swear to god" to cut your throat if you crossed him. The professor offered the opinion that apparently there was not much accurate information available about the group and that an excellent opportunity for research was open for anyone who wanted to make a study of the group.

Until the implementation of the 1964 Civil Rights Acts, the two counties in which these people reside supported three separate school systems: Black, White, and "Indian." By 1969 only one predominantly Cajun (and Indian) school remained --Reed's Chapel Elementary School. During the period when the Cajun school system was in full operation, the Cajuns appear to have developed rather well defined subgroupings centered around each of their neighborhood schools. It has been suggested that during this period there were "minorities among minorities" as different status rankings were identified with the school groupings (Weaver, 1969). One local white called these neighborhood groupings "little castes." Since 1969 practically all the Cajun youth have gone to desegregated schools. There is evidence that they have tended to form cliques within the schools and especially to defend their own people if fights should occur between members of the different groups.

Actually the school situation in the area has been troubled for decades. In 1930 a court hearing was held in Washington County to determine whether or not two students from the isolate could be legally excluded from the white public schools. The Court decided in favor of the school system, on the grounds that the children were "persons of color." In a similar case in Mobile County in the

same year, the court reviewed evidence which showed that the persons in question did not "classify themselves as negroes, or socially so identify themselves." Yet geneology proved to be all-important, and the judge of that trial wrote:

> The very conflicting and voluminous oral evidence admitted in this case is not so direct and persuasive to the Court as is the documentary evidence that these children have a drop or 1/64 negro blood through their maternal ancestor, and this regardless of such evidence touching their social relations in life. This case presents a most regrettable situation, but our law and evidence as I find it, I must decree that they be assigned to other schools than those provided for the white race.

The upshoot of these denials was that members of the group received little or no schooling. They refused to attend Black schools, and for several years had none of their own. Eventually, a three school system was begun in both counties. Pupil assignments were made by the school superintendents, who on the basis of court rulings, were given full power to do so. With the implementation of the Civil Rights Act, however, this arrangement has been greatly altered.

The third school system was never adequately staffed or funded. Competing for tax dollars in an area where expenditures for white schools--not to mention Black schools--has never been lavish, the third school system was at a great disadvantage. Hence, as late as 1969, there were schools where two teachers taught all 12 grades. Magnolia School, for example, had 44 students. The teacher I interviewed remembered teaching the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, and 12th grades all in one room. (No eleventh graders happened to be enrolled in Magnolia School that particular year.) Hill Spring School had the same arrangement, but with 60 students. Charity Chapel, with 90 students, had 3 teachers, and Pleasant View, with 120 students, had 4 teachers. All of these teachers, incidentally, were

white. "They would not have accepted a Black teacher," one informant told us. "The School Board in earlier years would send out Black teachers, but the Cajuns refused to attend the schools."

Galasneed Weaver, the principal of Reed's Chapel School, was particularly concerned that we tell about the improvements, not just the problems. "Everybody who comes down here wants to take pictures of people in ragged clothes, tumble-down shacks, and old wash pots. Our people resent this. Why don't they tell about the new brick homes our people are building, the kids who are going to college, the churches our people pastor?" The most impressive changes, as Mr. Weaver listed them, are these: (1) About half of the houses now have indoor plumbing facilities. (2) About 5 percent of the men are in business for themselves, either as proprietors of small businesses or as independent pulpwood operators. (3) A number of the residents of the community are branching out into occupations other than pulpwood procurement. Some of these jobs are semi-skilled. (4) Many of the women are obtaining public employment. Several of the school teachers are community residents. "All of the teachers at this school are Indians, with the exception of one teacher who is a Black." (5) All but one of the pastors of the Baptist churches, and approximately half of the Holiness pastors are group members. The others are white. (The pastors of the Methodist churches and the Roman Catholic church are white.) (6) A few of the members of the community now hold political offices. To be sure, these are minor offices, but the group is becoming politically aware of their strength and their legal rights.

Some community residents were less sanguine about the changes that have occurred. They readily acknowledged the gains in education that are occurring and the improvement in living conditions generally, but they had reservations about changes in behavior patterns. One of the pastors commented that he believed there was as much "drunkenness and immorality" now as there was 20 years ago. A lawyer said: "Seventy-five percent of the crimes of violence in this county occurs in the eastern tip where the Cajuns live." Another white respondent observed: "You know, there is a low caste of Cajuns that really works only three days a week. They're a lot like colored people in that respect." It is interesting that this white individual was aware of distinctions within the minority group itself, and hastened to add that certain families were making a real effort to improve themselves. It is our impression, based on several years of studying the area, that this effort is substantial and widespread. When we talked with residents of the community, we sensed a feeling of well being and optimism, albeit a cautious optimism. The old attitudes of hostility toward outsiders are still evident, and border at times on paranoia. It is an understandable response, however, for these people--as a people--have had few friends. Not even the courts--which in America have been a source of support for some minorities--have sided with them.

A final note about the role of kinship linkages in providing a sense of group consciousness for the Indians of South Alabama may be an appropriate point to conclude this report designed to answer the question, "Who are the Cajuns of South Alabama?" The fact that there are extensive kinship linkages, among this relatively large population is probably the strongest single factor providing

a sense of in-group consciousness, identification, and cohesiveness. When questioned about what is really the best name to use in referring to the people of the isolate, residents from within the group replied that among themselves the name commonly used when referring to fellow group members is that they are: "our people." The comment was also made that this is a real sense of in-group comfort and security which exists among the people. In recent years, due to pressure for upward mobility, it has not been uncommon for members of the community to move to Mobile, New Orleans, or other cities seeking to gain a new identification. When their people come back to visit (or to live) their most frequent comment is reported to be that they were never able to feel as happy, or comfortable, or secure, any place else as they feel when they are with "our people."

## Notes

[1]See particularly Green, 14-24, and Calvin L. Beale to Bibb B. Huffstutler, September 4 and 6, 1964. Manuscript letters in possession of author. Green mentions four different people in Washington and Mobile counties who have records on the Reed family.

[2]Beale to Huffstutler, September 4, 1964. Manuscript letter in possession of the authors.

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